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AUTHOR Vanden Akker, Sherri L.
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ABSTRACT

A student was able to overcome flatness in his writing when he focused on the process of writing rather than the product. The student's draft of an essay about a symbol the student found meaningful contained spelling and grammatical errors and was also "flat." The essay had no apparent thesis, demonstrated lack of success in issues of writing style, and showed little voice. The student, responding to the teacher's comments on his essay, indicated that he had lost himself somewhere in the writing process--he had turned the essay topic from something he cared about (the gift of a watch) not care about time. He had become more concerned with the final into something he did product of writing rather than the process of writing as discovery. Subsequent drafts demonstrated improved theses, an improved writing style, and a greater use of "voice." By treating the writing process as one of discovery, the student entered into a dialogical relationship first with himself and then with his audience. Flat text is not an insurmountable problem: it is something teachers and students can both understand and work to overcome. (RS)

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March 23, 1991
CCCC Presentation
Sherri L. Vanden Akker

DEFINING AND ANIMATING FLAT TEXT: A CASE STUDY

In this essay, I'd like to discuss a phenomenon that we who teach writing all see, we all recognize it when we see it, and we all call it by different names -- Ken McCrorie uses "Engfish," I call it "flat text." I'd like to offer a definition of "flat text," one I've been developing for myself over the past year, and share with you one student's success in overcoming flatness in his writing.

Putting forth a new term, as I am about to do, is risky, especially when one has such limited space in which to do so. Obviously, there will be questions some of the terms I use and some of the assumptions I make. Naturally these terms and assumptions will reveal much about my pedagogy. Yet, in spite of the risks inherent in taking on this term, I believe it's important for us to define, or to start to define, "flatness" because once we understand this type of text, we'll be better able to help students overcome their problems with it.

Defining the Problem

First, I'll give a sample of some flat student text. Here is the first page of an essay one of my students, Michael, turned in. He had been asked to write about a symbol that he found meaningful. Michael decided to write about a watch he had received from his four year old cousin for his 17th birthday.

> A symbol is something that respresents something else by association, resemblance, or convention. Symbolism has been around since the beginning of time and most people don't realize it. There are so many things in this country that are just accepted by people as something else. For example we have a smile, a handshake, traffic signs, flags, and the one thing that interests me is a clock or watch. I am writing this essay on how a clock or watch is a symbol of time and not just a funny looking thing iwth numbers and hands on it.
>
> A clock or watch symbolizes time by keeping track of the seconds, minutes, and hours that have past and are to come. The most peculiar thing is it never stops symbolizing time. When do you ever stop wondering or having some recollection of time? The thing is, you probably don't because from the time you were put on this earth until you leave you will use some kind of clock for its significant duty of keeping

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> time. Clocks and watches are mostly known for their symbolizing time but there are times when it could possibly symbolize the type of person's style he or she has. The reason I say this is just because all clocks and watches keep time it doesn't mean they have to look the same or even act in the same manner. For example, they come in all kinds of different shapes, sizes, colors, and fashions. . . .

The essay continues on for several more pages in the same vein. The essay has many problems -- spelling and grammar issues are prevalent, clarity is certainly a concern. But these flaws are not what make the essay "flat" for me. Indeed, if they were, I'd be relieved because grammar and spelling flaws, and even problems with clarity, can be addressed fairly easily; they involve extremely teachable skills. Peer help, handbooks, spellcheck programs, and even drills can all be employed to address these problems. Flatness is a far more complicated issue. For one thing, it's a systemic problem, at least as I am about to define it. I believe that flatness involves many of the major elements of writing -- content, style, and voice are all involved when we talk about "flatness."

First, let's look at content, or thesis. In Michael's essay there is no apparent thesis. His goal is to discuss "Time," but unfortunately his topic is too broad and his terms too general for him to do so in a meaningful way. As it stands, his essay has no driving line of logic to it, no question to explore, no cohesive thought to put forth. He does make many <u>observations</u> in the course of this essay (these are

taken from the whole essay, not just the page excerpted above):

> - "A clock or watch symbolizes time by keeping track of the seconds, minutes, and hours that have past and are to come.
>
> - There are various types of clocks and watches and they all serve the same purpose, but on the other hand they may do it in their own unique way.
>
> - The clocks and watches of this world come in various colors and designs. . . "

Michael also raises some truly rich ideas:

> - There must have been many times you wish you could just control time or turn back the clock to make your fun and happiness last longer than your pain and sorrow.
>
> - The most intriguing thing about clocks is they set the course of time. They count your days of life and it's almost to the point where they symbolize life itself.
>
> - You figure from the time you take your first breath when you were born the time was registered on the birth certificate. Then, when the time comes, while in the custody of medical assistance, you take your last breath and pass away,, the time is registered on your death certificate.

Yet, the mere <u>presence</u> of observations and ideas does not allow the essay to successfully make an inquiry or be an exposition or even good old-fashioned argument. Ultimately, this lack of thesis is a major contributor to the flatness of the text.

In addition to issues with thesis or content, there are issues with style here. For the sake of brevity, I'll define style as diction, sentence structure and syntax, density and types of figurative language, and rhetorical aims and devices (Abrams 191).

The diction in this essay is not particularly interesting or graceful, as in this sentence, "Clocks and watches are mostly known for their symbolizing time but there are times when it could possibly symbolize the type of a person's style he or she has." It seems Michael has internalized an impoverished definition of academic discourse, doesn't it? Also, sentence structure is a problem in this sentence, and in many others. Nor is there figurative language in this essay; the whole thing is extremely literal.

I find it interesting that Michael does employ a number of what could be called "rhetorical devices." For one, he writes the essay almost entirely in the third person, in order, one presumes, to make it "formal." He has generalized his subject matter too; he makes no mention of the occasion which prompted the essay -- receiving a watch as a gift from his 4 year old cousin. One assumes he turns the subject away from receiving the gift and onto the larger issue of "Time" because he feels this will make it more universal; perhaps he feels "general" topics appeal to a wider audiences than accounts about personal experiences do.

Also, at several points Michael draws attention to the construction of the essay. He uses phrases like:

- I am writing this essay on. . .
- The reason I say this is. . .
- Well here is a perfect example of. . .
- I'm briefly going to explain how. . .
- The reason brings me to my next conclusion. . .
- I would like to conclude this essay with. . .

This "staging" makes the essay feel forced, as if it must follow a formula instead of unfold organically, according to the demands of his content.

The overall lack of success in issues of style -- the lack of delicious diction and varied sentence structures, the absence of figurative language, and the use of stiff, artificial rhetorical devices -- all contribute to the flatness of this essay.

The last aspect I'd like to consider here is voice. Undoubtedly, voice is a problematic term for many of us, myself included, but probably most of us use and have some kind of a definition for this rather slippery term. In this context, I use voice to refer to a sense of a person standing behind the writing. As Peter Elbow puts it, ". . . writing without voice is wooden or dead beacuse it lacks sound, rhythm, energy, and individuality" (Elbow 299).

Michael's essay shows little voice. There isn't a sense of anyone present in his piece; were the essay handed in without Michael's name on it, I wouldn't have recognized it as his work. The diction and syntax here do not mirror patterns of his speech, or those in his journal and freewriting. The sentences here are "faceless." The first sentence of his draft is respresentative: "A symbol is something that represents something else by association, resemblance, or convention." These words sound like they

come from a dictionary (perhaps they do), not from the mind and pen of an eighteen year old student.

Without belaboring things, I do want to underscore my assertion that it is a combination of factors that makes for "flat" prose. It is unlikely that prose with any one problem -- whether with thesis, with style, or with voice -- would strike any of us as "flat." I am suggesting that flatness is a more systemic problem, one that occurs when several important aspects of writing are weak all at the same time.

Animating Flat Text

Now I'd like to turn away from the question of "What is flat text?" to the question, "Why do students produce it?" I'm sure there are many valid answers to the "why" question. I'd like to share one I learned from working with Michael. I'll start here by giving the comments I wrote on Michael's draft:

> Mike,
>
> This essay feels a bit like a phone-book to me:
> Watches, Time
> Watches, Style
> Watches, Self-image
> Time, relative nature of, etc.
> Aha, but "Time, relative nature of" is something you talked about a couple of times, and talked about with interest. I liked your sections about time feeling relative or elastic (even though it's a static and fixed entity), and the examples you gave -- a good class goes quickly and a poor one slowly, even if they're both 50 minutes long. Or, the football game -- 3 seconds mattered so much. Maybe this is your area of interest.

> On your next draft, please write about something you really care about, something that truly interests you.

Here wrote a response back to me. I find it illuminating:

> When I first received my . . . draft back I was shocked . . . because you had made me realize that what I wrote didn't really interest me. When I first heard about writing I was really afraid,. . . because of the fact you have to write endless pages on something. But now I'm beginning to realize more that it isn't just writing about anything it is writing about something you want to write about. This makes it much more easier and enjoyable. When I wrote my final draft I can't say I enjoyed it,, but I honestly <u>can</u> say I didn't mind it as much as I thought I would.

Isn't it curious that Michael states he didn't write this draft about something that interested him when he picked the topic "Time" because receiving his watch was important to him? In the process of writing the paper, Michael turned his topic from something he cared about -- the gift -- into something he didn't care about -- Time. He put a great deal of work into his paper; he wrote 3 drafts before he handed in the one I'm discussing. However, he lost himself somewhere in the process.

Why did Michael lose himself in the writing process? I suggest that he, like so many students, treated his essay as <u>product</u>. That is, when he approached writing with the idea that he, in his words, had to "write endless pages on something," he turned his essay into an object, a piece to be produced, handed in, and graded. As a result, his essay had no rhetorical context -- he didn't have a purpose in mind for the paper, or a sense of an interaction with a

genuine audience. When he learned that he could "write about something you want to write about," he started to treat writing as process of discovery, one taking place between himself and an audience. Let's see what a difference his new approach, his process approach made in his work. Here is the first page from his next draft of the same essay:

> It was a warm summer evening, the sky was still light, and it was the twentieth of July and what do you know, it was my birthday. It was a huge party because I come from an Italian family. . . . I was now at the age where receiving money in a card was better than waiting in the exchange lines to any department store. As I looked on the table I saw millions of card. . . Among this mass of cards was a rather small oblong shaped box. It stuck out like a sore thumb not because it was the only present, but by the way it was wrapped. The wrapping paper was that of a comic strip page of a newspaper and had at least a half a roll of Scotch tape around it. As soon as I saw it I had a good suspicion of who it might be from. When I read who the present was from, my suspicion was correct. The wrapped box read, "To Mike, Love Deanna. . . ."
>
> Deana's gift was something I would never expect from her. Why would I think that? The reason is, because I judged her and the gift before I knew what it was. It's more or less like the social world of today.
>
> It's a dark and smokey room and the sound of people's conversations are drowned out by the overblaring of Guns N' Roses' smash hit, "Welcome to the Jungle." A person is standing by him or herself because he or she might have a funny hair cut, be overweight, or suffering from a stage in life we all go through called acne. . . How are you going to know what the person is really like if you don't meet that person? So what I'm trying to say is don't judge a person, like I judged Deana's gift, or you may be in for a surprize when you find out the reality of it. I did, and I still cherish the watch I received and the values that I now have because of it.

This draft of the essay has many of the same problems the previous drafts had -- spelling, grammar, clarity, etc. However, this draft is not "flat."

As we look at the thesis, style, and voice in this draft, the objection cropping up in many of your minds will be addressed. That objection is, of course, that this draft is more like a story than an essay. I hope to make it clear, however, that this draft, in spite of its heavy reliance on narrative, is more of an "essay" as we traditionally define the term, than the previous draft is.

First, on the issue of thesis, this draft if far advanced over the first. Here Michael has put forth a genuine thesis, which you saw in the last paragraph of the sample, The "thesis" could be summed up as, "Never judge by appearances." To us, the thesis may seem cliched and simplistic, but it is a valid one, nonetheless, it is developed in the essay, and it is one the student cares about and finds relevant to his life. In his previous draft, Michael was unable to establish a thesis, or put forth a cohesive thought or explore a question.

Michael's style has improved a great deal as well. Sentences like the opening one, "It was a warm summer evening, the sky was still light, and it was the twentieth of July. . . " set a mood and are extremely vivid. Further, they're a sharp contrast to the sentences in his previous draft. Just compare the openings -- "It was a warm summer

night," etc. to, "A symbol is something that represents something else by association, resemblance, or convention." Also, Mike uses some figurative language here -- "It stuck out like a sore thumb," and later, "Getting through all the Scotch Tape was like chopping down an oak tree with a jacknife." These images, like the thesis, are not altogether original, especially not the first one, but they were absent from the earlier draft and their very presence is an improvement. Indeed, the whole essay has become a metaphor, in a sense; Mike draws an extended analogy between opening a gift on his seventeenth birthday and meeting new people during his university career.

Certainly one hears more of Mike's voice in this draft than in his previous one. I think voice is heard especially in the last paragraph, part of which I'll give again:

> It's a dark and smokey room and the sound of people's conversations are drowned out by the overblaring of Guns N' Roses' smash hit, "Welcome to the Jungle." A person is standing by him or herself because he or she might have a funny hair cut, be overweight, or suffering from a stage in life we all go through called acne. . .

Let me state once again that beginning with this draft, Michael stopped approaching writing as if it were an object, or product, to manufacture and started to view writing as a process of discovery. While it is old hat to us that writing can, and ought, to be a mode of discovery, a process, this is not evident to students. For Michael, and

many of his peers, this is a real revelation, one that often leads to dramatic results in their writing.

Also, one may note that in treating the writing process as one of discovery, Michael entered into a dialogical relationship, first with himself, and then with an audience. Michael started to engage himself in the writing process by writing about something that interested him in this draft; he returned to the subject that initially interested him -- receiving his watch. Also, he starts to write about his values here. He invites others to engage with him by giving them details that allow them to place themselves into the setting and experience the events with him, details like, "It was the twentieth of July and it was my birthday," and later, a description of his family singing "Happy Birthday" to him.

Mike's systemic "flatness" largely disappeared when he made the shift from a product oriented approach to a process oriented one. Unfortunately, this will not be the case for every student. After all, not all flat text is the result of a student taking a product oriented approach to writing. Nor is every essay written in a product-oriented approach "flat." What is important for us to realize is that flat text is not an insurmountable problem for us as instructors and for our students. It is something we can both understand and work to overcome.

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APPENDIX I -- First draft

A symbol is something that represents something else by association, resemblance, or convention. Symbolism has been around since the begining [sic] of time and most people don't realize it. There are so many things in this country that are just excepted [sic] by people as something else. For example we have a smile, a hand shake, traffic signs, flags, and the one thing that intrests [sic] me is a clock or watch. I am writing this essay on how a clock or watch is a symbol of time and no [sic] just a funny looking thing with numbers and hands on it.

A clock or watch symbolizes time by keeping track of the seconds, minutes, and hours that have pasted [sic] and here to come. The most peculiar thing is it never stops symbolizing time. When do you ever stop wondering or having some recolection [sic] of time? The thing is, you probably don't because from the time you were put on this earth until you leave you will use some kind of clock for its significant duty of keeping time. Clocks and watches are mostly known for their symbolizing time but there are times when it could possibly symbolize the type of a persons [sic] style he or she has. The reason I say this is, just because all clocks and watches keep time it doesn't mean they have to look the same or even act in the same manner. For example they come in all kind [sic] of different shapes, sizes, colors, and fashions.

There are vaious types of clocks and watches and they all serve the same purpose but on the other hand they may do it in their own unique way. Some timepieces have two hands on a face with the numbers one to twelve written in a circular fashion and sometimes a third hand known as the second hand. The terminology may sound different but they too symbolize their true functions. The kind of clock I just described is your basic clock but this doesn't mean they all come in the same shape, size, color, and fashion. Then with better technology you can have a clock or watch that has a computer form digital read out of the time. If you feel you have to be real [sic] primitive you can have a device called a sundial which is realy [sic] plain and simple. It consists a [sic] centerpiece surounded [sic] by numbers that casts a shadow of the sun as it moves.

The clocks and watches of this world come in various colors and designs. The clocks come in so many colors because they have to be appealing to the owner. In this world today art and style are very important, that is probably their [sic] are so many different designs and styles to clocks and watchs [sic]. Clocks come in all different sizes, compare the "Big Ben" of Paris [sic] to the grandfather clock in your or someone else's house or even the clock on the wall to the one you wear around your wrist. When I said earlier you could tell alot [sic] about a person by the kind of watch he or she is wearing. Well here is a

perfect example, you notice that a person is wearing a beautiful Rolex watch so you would probably sence [sic] that there was some kind of wealth involved, but if somehow you revealed it was fake you would realize that the person may what [sic] people to think he or she is wealthy. The same would go to [sic] a person who was wearing a wildly designed watch. Since I kind of explained how clocks and watches symbolize time, style, and personality. I'm briefly going to explain how they came to symbolize direction. Clocks came to symbolize direction due to the fact that the hands that express the passage and coming of time move in a right to left fashion. So when you hear the term clockwise and counter clockwise you can kind of figure where they originated from.

It is kind of striking to think that weird device that registers time can have such a demand on one's life. Basically clocks and watches set the time schedules of everyone's day, no matter if you are young or old without them you are lost. To make a small poiint, say you were in a room with no windows and you had a watch compared to someone in the same predicament but didn't have a watch. You could more than likely know if it was light or dark outside where on the other hand the other guy has no clue. The reason for this brings me to my next conclusion.

The passage of time is very desieving [sic] and always seems that no matter what the circumstances are time never passes the way you want it to. Did you ever sit and stare at a clock waiting for one of your worse [sic] classes to end? Then theres [sic] another time you are in a class you really enjoy, and just as it starts to get even more intesting [sic] the class is over. It is phynoeminal [sic] the clock keeps time only at its own unchangable [sic] pace. Yet we seem to think at times it moves quicker or slower than other times. That is why we have the old sayings, "If you watch the pot of soup it won't boil." and "Time flies when your [sic] having fun." There must have been many times you wish you could just control time or turn back the clock to make your fun and happiness last longer than your pain and sorrow. The most intriguing thing about clocks is they set the course of time. They count your days of life and it's almost to the point where they symbolize life itself. You figure from the time you take your first breath when you were born the time was registered on the birth certificate. Then, when the times comes, while in custody of medical assistance, you take your last breate [sic] and pass away the time is registered on your death certificate. The clock tells you to [sic] when to go to class, go to eat, go to bed, and when it's time to wake up. So when you look at your clock or watch just think about, how it controls your life and if it makes you happy or angry. It is funny to relate a clock with human characteristics, but it is true. People and myself, [sic] get angry, scared, or even overwhelmed with the results the clock may have at certain times. The score of my Thanksgiving day Football game was

twenty-three to twenty two, my team in favor. The other team had the ball and was driving down the field. There was [sic] ten seconds remaing [sic] on the clock, and everyone though [sic] that there is only time for one more play. The play went on and there was a long pass, the receive [sic] reached out his hands with a grin on his face knowing for sure this game was over in his favor. Out of the blue from the opposite [sic] my teammate leaped at his last chance to save the game and knocked the ball down. The play was over and I turned to look at the clock and it read three seconds and was counting down. Since the other time [sic] had no time outs remaining our time [sic] was triumphant and for that few seconds I watched the clock tick away I loved that clock. This was a perfect example how people feel emoition [sic] towards the clock because we seem to give it a human characteristic of almost like caring.

The most celebration and social partying done that involved the clock is New Year's Eve. This is the time when almost every one in the country or even world is fixed in front of or in the presence of a clock to witness the passing of time. It is the clock that lets us end a year and begin a new one.

I would like to conclude this essay with just one more thought on clocks and watches. The clock and watch is the king of time and time is the key to life so don't ever underestimate them because weather [sic] you like it or not they will always do what is expected of them and by now I figure I don't have to say it. The only time I might be wrong is when the electricity is out or the battery is dead because it's time was up.

APPENDIX II - Second draft

It was a warm summer evening, the sky was still light, and it was the twentith [sic] of July, and what do you know, it was my birthday. It was a huge party because I come from an Italian family. Well, my mother's three sisters' families, her brother's family, and of course her cousins and their families. So now you probably have an idea on how this festive gathering looks. Anyhow, it was my birthday party, and to be more precise, it was my seventeenth birthday party. I was now at the age where receiving money in a card was easier than waiting in the exchange lines to any department store. As I looked on the table I saw millions of cards, well I won't exaggerate maybe a few thousand. Among this mass of cards was a rather small oblong shaped box. It stuck out like a sore thumb not because it was the only present, but by the way it was wrapped. The wrapping paper was that of a comic strip page of a newspaper and had at least a half a roll of Scotch Tape around it. As soon as I saw it I had a good suspicion of who it might be from. When I read who the present was from, my suspicion was correct. The wrapped box read "To Mike, Love Deanna," as you can see she's just learning how to write. For a brief instant a chill ran down my spine and I began to sweat because there was no way I was going to be embarassed by a three year old. It wasn't until my shirt was soaked when I realized that she was only my little cousin, and I could act like I liked it. You know when ever you go over to see the kid tell her how much you love her gift or a bunch of garbage to that effect.

Now it was the moment I was waiting for, or was it? The lights went out and for a second I was scared, but I was really embarrassed because I was surronded by a bunch of glowing faces with their mouths opening and closing. At first it started as a mumble but then it was clear that they were all trying to sing together. When the humiliating tradition was over there was only one thing left to do. That was to see how fast a seventeen year old guy could rip through a pile of birthday cards addressed to him. There was a trick to this that I have mastered over the years of living in a family that requested a thank you to who ever gave you the gift. While you open the card hold it at an angle so at the same time the money falls in your hand and you catch a glimpse of the name of the person it was from.

All what was left was a colorful pile of shredded envelopes, and in this disarray was a present to me from my little cousin Deana. I looked across the table and all I could see was half of her face because the table was blocking the rest of it. I don't know if it was those big brown puppy dog eyes or the thought of this impatient little girl waiting for her gift to be opened with that sad look on her face. There could have been a rock in that box and I still would have said I loved it, after seeing her little face that way. I picked up the box and of course shook it

and said, "I wonder what this could be?" I casually turned to look at her and noticed the biggest grin I ever saw on a child's face and now I felt much better. Getting through all the Scotch Tape was like chopping down an oak tree with a jacknife. Finally it was unwrapped and all that was left was a Zale's Jewelers box. Now you know as well as I do that this wasn't the box it originally came in. With caution I opened it, yet before I could see in it I could hear a ticking sound. I thought twice before realizing that what I was thinking would only be in a James Bond movie or some other kind of spy movie. To my surprise when I opened the box completely and really liked what was inside. I figured I could get a lot of use out of it. Besides my mother who had already reminded me of this by jabbing me with her elbow in my side while saying how much I could use something like this. After I put it on I went over and picked up Deana and laid a big kiss on her cheek telling her it was my very best gift I had ever received. I figured that was what she probably wanted to hear. By the way if you haven't already guessed, I recieved [sic] a watch for my birthday that year, and better yet, it is the same watch that I wear today. The one thing I'll never forget when I go to put this watch on is I'll never again judge something by it's [sic] cover. The funny thing about it is, that my little cousin Deana helped me understand this.

Deana's gift was something I would never expect from her. Why would I think that? The reason is, because I judged her and the gift before I knew what it was. It's more or less like the social world of today.

It's a dark and smokey [sic] room and the sound of people's conversations drowned out by the over blairing [sic] of Guns N' Roses' smash hit "Welcome to the Jungle". A person is standing by his or herself because he or she might have a funny hair cut, be over weight, or suffering from a stage in life we all go through called acne. All of these things may be noticable [sic] in a crowd, and most of the time people are shunned because of it. How are you going to know what the person is really like if you don't meet that person? So what I'm trying to say is don't judge a person, like I judged Deana's gift, you may be in for a surpize when you find out the realality [sic] of it. I did, and I still cherish the watch I received and the values that I now have because of it.